

## West-central Mexico — 18 to 27 November 2005



The group – Bob (top left), Kay (top right), Steve (bottom left), and Jay (bottom right).

This report summarizes a trip to the Colima/Jalisco area of Mexico during late November 2005. Participants were Bob Cecil (Des Moines, Iowa), Stephen J. Dinsmore (Ames, Iowa), Jay Gilliam (Norwalk, Iowa), and Kay Niyo (Evergreen, Colorado). The weather was cooler than normal at the beginning of the trip, but became more seasonable towards the end of the trip. Our vehicle for the trip was Jay's Nissan Pathfinder. The birding was excellent, as usual.

### 18/19 November

Out travel plan called for 3 of us (Bob, Jay and Steve) to drive a vehicle from Iowa, rendezvousing with Kay in San Antonio (she would fly there from Denver, CO). The Iowa crew met at Jay's house in Norwalk at 2:30 p.m. on the 18<sup>th</sup> to begin the long drive. We drove all night and met Kay at her motel in San Antonio at 6 a.m., exchanged money in Laredo, and crossed the border by 11:45 a.m. at the main Nuevo Laredo crossing. We didn't see many birds on the drive from the border south to Zacatecas except for a lone Golden Eagle somewhere in Nuevo Leon. We reached Zacatecas by 8 p.m. and spent the night at the former Aristos Motel (\$60 for a double room). We ate dinner in the motel restaurant, where the food was unexceptional. The motel had recently changed owners and was almost deserted!

## 20 November

We still had a long drive south to Sayula, so we woke early and were on the road by 6:45 a.m. Our primary focus of this trip was to explore Laguna Sayula and count some of the waterbirds Bob has noted there on previous trips to Mexico. Photos from a local contact indicated water levels were good in September, but unfortunately the lagoons were nearly dry when we arrived. We found one drying lagoon near Atoyac where we counted 318 Snowy Plovers (including 1 color-banded individual whose exact origin we never discovered, but was probably from the Pacific Coast of the U.S.), 4600+ Western Sandpipers, and an assortment of other waterbirds.



As we were leaving the area, we noticed a column of smoke on the highway that turned out to be a burning RV camper! Within a half hour, the entire vehicle was reduced to a smoldering chassis; thankfully no one appeared to be injured. We concluded this was appropriately called a car-b-que.



We continued south from there, checking out one dry lagoon after another until we found a small wet area on the west side of Highway 54 just north of the exit to Ciudad Guzman. Here, we finally found an adult Ross's Goose amongst the hundreds of Snow Geese after searching the entire flock multiple times! Other birds included Northern Pintail, King Rail, Marsh Wren and a large flock of 2,000+ Yellow-headed Blackbirds.

On a more scientific note, we spotted a neck collared Snow Goose banded in 2002 at Queen Maud Gulf, Nunavut. This is one of the southernmost wintering areas for Snow Geese, so the sighting was especially interesting. Needless to say, we were disappointed with water conditions at the lagoon, and concluded that it had perhaps been drier than normal and that we would have been better to have planned our trip a little earlier in fall.

At 6 p.m. we decided to call it a day and headed for Sayula, the nearest major town, where we found a nice motel near the town center (590 pesos for a double). Dinner was street tacos (my favorite!) off the main town square, where we met a gringo, Henry Vasquez, with whom we enjoyed talking during dinner. (temperature 34–86 °F, wind light, clear skies)



## 21 November

We woke early and left Sayula by 6:30 a.m. At 7 a.m. we stopped for an hour at Laguna Zapopan (below), which had lots of water and a nice assortment of waterbirds. In addition to the usual assortment of herons, we saw Pied-billed Grebe, King Rail, Ring-billed Gull, and Caspian Tern. We then continued south to Volcan Nieve, arriving there at 8:45 a.m.



The weather was perfect on the volcano with light winds and moderate temperatures, and the birds cooperated nicely. This is also a special place to bird because the elevation changes dramatically, as does the habitat and resulting bird community. The dry scrub from km 2–3 was very birdy and we enjoyed noisy flocks of Gray Silky-flycatchers plus many common residents. In the dry pine forest at km 4, we saw our first Mexican Jay, Pygmy Nuthatch, Red Warbler, and Black-headed Siskin.



By km 6, the forest had changed again to a mixed oak-pine forest where we heard 2 Crested Guans and saw a nice assortment of expected warblers, Collared Towhee, and Green-striped Brush Finch. Climbing still higher the forest changed to a moister high elevation fir forest near km 11. Here we encountered Band-tailed Pigeon, Northern Pygmy-Owl, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy Woodpecker, Mexican Chickadee, Gray-barred Wren, Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer, and Red Crossbill. But the real surprise was

yet to come. As we were walking back to the vehicle along a trail, I commented that the old growth habitat reminded me of Spotted Owl habitat in northern California. Aware that this species was possible in Colima, I attempted to imitate the female call from memory. After a few attempts, nothing responded, so we laughed a little and gave it up. But after taking just a few steps down the trail, one answered from somewhere uphill! It called sporadically for about 15 minutes, but a search of the hillside failed to locate the bird, although it was surely watching us the entire time. Then at the top, just past the entrance into the park (10 pesos per person entry



fee), a Long-tailed Wood-Partridge ran across the road giving us brief looks. After leaving the volcano at 4:45 p.m., we made a beeline for La Maria, arriving there at 6:15 p.m. (300 pesos for a double room, which now have hot water and a nice restaurant upstairs) (temperature 35–78 °F, wind light south, mostly clear skies).

## 22 November



We arose a bit late today and were birding the grounds at La Maria by 7 a.m. As usual, La Maria had lots of birds, and we leisurely birded the vicinity of the lake until 11:30 a.m. The bird list was diverse and included a nice assortment of lower elevation residents and neotropical migrants. Some of the more interesting species included Short-tailed Hawk, Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl,

White-striped Woodcreeper, Eastern Bluebird, Blue Mockingbird, 14 species of warblers including Gray-crowned Yellowthroat, and Lesser Goldfinch.

After leaving La Maria, we drove to Comala where we birded the south edge of town for about an hour before lunch at 1 p.m. A few minutes in the mid-day heat produced a small flock of Mexican Parrotlets and a Russet-crowned Motmot! We ate lunch at the big restaurant on the south edge of town, where the purchase of a round of beers ensures you will not starve to death! The “free” food included miniature



tacos, ceviche, and several other local dishes. We were on the road to Colima by 2 p.m., and headed towards balneario (swimming hole/party spot) Agua Fria where the birding



was slow in the mid-day heat. This is on the free road to Minatitlan/Manzanillo, perhaps 3 or 4 miles past the Rio Armeria bridge. Along the nearby Agua Dulce road, perhaps a mile past the Agua Fria road, we encountered lots of birds including a pair of Russet-crowned Motmots, many Orange-fronted Parakeets, Bell’s Vireo, and Lucy’s Warbler. On our return to Colima we

saw 2 large Red-legged Tarantulas crossing the road and stopped to briefly admire one. We ate dinner at Bob’s friend Rocio’s house and were in our motel (Hotel Maria Isabel) in Colima by 8 p.m. (a nice 5-star motel, which we got for about \$45 per night with Rocio’s discount, since she works there) (temperature 48–91 °F, winds W 5–15 mph, mostly clear but hazy).

### 23 November

We got a nice start at 7 a.m. and headed west again to the road to Agua Dulce, where we birded until 10:15 a.m. There is some pretty nice forest along this road that is easily accessed from the main road east to Minatitlan. Birding here produced Squirrel Cuckoo, Orange-fronted Parakeet, Lineated Woodpecker, San Blas Jay, a cooperative flock of White-throated Magpie-Jays, Scrub Euphonia, Orange-breasted Bunting, and



Yellow-winged Cacique. We also stopped several more times higher up on the road to Minatitlan, but didn't see many birds on this stretch of road, and eventually returned to Colima at 11:45 a.m. We then headed towards Tecoman, where made a quick stop at the sewage lagoons (nearly dry) and saw a Fulvous Whistling-Duck and a few individuals of some of the more common waterbirds. We then returned to town and made a quick stop at the hospital, where we donated my old laptop in return for the service I received there in 2001 after dislocating my shoulder in a surfing accident.



After leaving Tecoman, we drove north on the Autopista towards La Manzanilla, arriving there at 4:45 p.m. We stopped to gawk at the American Crocodiles that have become a local tourist attraction and then drove north along the beach where we saw few birds in the afternoon heat. After a couple of beers on the beach, while watching

Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Boobies, we checked into our motel and had a relaxing dinner of fried shrimp at one of the many restaurants on the beach (70 pesos per meal, excellent!). Evening at Posada Tonalá in La Manzanilla near the beach (450 pesos for a double room) (temperature 48–95 °F, wind SW 5–15 mph, mostly clear skies and hazy).

## 24 November

We rendezvoused at 7:30 a.m. for a pelagic trip off La Manzanilla with Steve Rutherford (2000 pesos for a half day trip). The trip was excellent! We spent about an hour working our way offshore to a distance of about 6 miles. We then spent about 2 hours drifting and motoring slowly parallel to shore, encountering many seabirds 6–8 miles



offshore. Unfortunately, Steve was reluctant to go farther offshore because he apparently left his GPS unit back on land! Seabirds (most were seen well offshore) included 2 Common Loons, 5 Red-billed Tropicbirds, 377 Brown Boobies, 4 Pink-footed, 1 Black-vented, and 7 Audubon's shearwaters, 48 Black and 24 Least storm-petrels, 24 Red-necked Phalaropes, 2 Pomarine Jaegers

(plus another unidentified jaeger that was probably this species), and 3 Common and 264 Black terns. Other wildlife included many dolphins, 3 sea turtles, and several large Sailfish. We started for land at 10:45 a.m. and were back in La Manzanilla by noon. We ate a quick lunch (fried shrimp for me, 70 pesos) and immediately left town for points north at 12:30 p.m.



From La Manzanilla we decided to take the more direct (but slower) road north through Autlan. This road was tantalizingly slow, generously peppered with topes (speed bumps), and was not a pleasant drive. Near La Huerta we were surprised to see an adult White-tailed Hawk, a species that is decidedly uncommon away from the immediate coast. We made a single stop, at Laguna del Rosario, although we barely found a place to pull off the extremely busy highway. The lagoon was in the process of drying up and held good numbers of waterbirds including 1,800 Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, a nice assortment of the more common waterfowl and herons, Virginia Rail, 3 Limpkins, and a few shorebirds. We eventually arrived in Guadalajara at 5:30 p.m. and were caught in rush hour traffic. We finally got through town by 6:15 p.m. and drove north another hour to stay in the tiny town of Ixtlahuacan (250 pesos for a double room in a nice hotel). Kay broke the leg of her bed, perhaps a sign that she had been eating and drinking too much! (temperature 61–88 °F, mostly clear, winds SW 10–15 mph)

## 25 November

We left Ixtlahuacan at 6:30 a.m. and drove north, stopping at 10 a.m. for a few minutes to bird the road to the La Quemada ruins in Zacatecas. It was hot and windy and the birding was slow, although we did see some nice high elevation scrub birds that included a Greater Roadrunner. We then continued north on Highway 54, and then cut east over the Sierra Madre Oriental to Highway 57 southeast of Saltillo. We drove south



on 57 for a few miles, passing through the extensive colonies of endangered Mexican Prairie Dogs. We took a couple of dirt roads to the west and into the colonies and eventually found what we were looking for — 22 Mountain Plovers. We also enjoyed other birds typical of this habitat, including Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl, and

Horned Lark. From here, we turned back north and headed for Saltillo at 5 p.m. On the way, a small weasel-like animal crossed a road in front of us, and based on our quick looks appeared to be a Black-footed Ferret! Alas, the animal disappeared into a burrow and didn't show itself again. As it was now getting dark and we didn't want to negotiate



Monterrey at night, we decided to spend the night in a motel on the north edge of Saltillo, where we arrived at 7 p.m. (450 pesos for a double room) (temperature 46–89 °F, clear, winds W 10–25 mph).

## 26 November



We left Saltillo at 6:45 a.m. and headed for the border and home. We didn't stop anywhere to bird, although we enjoyed several large flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese along Highway 85 between Monterrey and the border. We had a smooth border crossing, except for a 1 ½ hour wait in a mile-long line of cars, and eventually dropped Kay at her motel in San Antonio in early evening (she flew home the next morning). The three of us then drove overnight, arriving home in Iowa at 6 a.m. on the 27<sup>th</sup>. The trip totaled 4,464 miles.

**\*\*All photos in this report are copyrighted by Jay Gilliam and Stephen J. Dinsmore.**

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## Species list (263 species)

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck  
Fulvous Whistling-Duck  
Greater White-fronted Goose  
Snow Goose  
Ross's Goose  
Gadwall  
American Wigeon  
Mallard  
Blue-winged Teal  
Cinnamon Teal  
Northern Shoveler  
Northern Pintail  
Green-winged Teal  
Ruddy Duck  
Common Loon  
Pied-billed Grebe  
Least Grebe  
Eared Grebe  
Pink-footed Shearwater  
Black-vented Shearwater  
Audubon's Shearwater  
Black Storm-Petrel  
Least Storm-Petrel  
Red-billed Tropicbird  
Brown Booby  
American White Pelican  
Brown Pelican  
Neotropic Cormorant  
Double-crested Cormorant  
Anhinga  
Magnificent Frigatebird  
Great Blue Heron  
Great Egret  
Snowy Egret  
Little Blue Heron  
Tricolored Heron  
Cattle Egret  
Green Heron  
Black-crowned Night-Heron  
White Ibis  
White-faced Ibis  
Wood Stork  
Black Vulture  
Turkey Vulture  
Osprey  
White-tailed Kite  
Northern Harrier  
Sharp-shinned Hawk  
Cooper's Hawk  
Gray Hawk  
Common Black-Hawk  
Harris' Hawk  
Roadside Hawk  
Short-tailed Hawk  
Swainson's Hawk  
White-tailed Hawk  
Red-tailed Hawk  
Golden Eagle  
Crested Caracara  
American Kestrel

West Mexican Chachalaca  
Crested Guan  
Long-tailed Wood-Partridge  
King Rail  
Virginia Rail  
Sora  
Common Moorhen  
American Coot  
Limpkin  
Snowy Plover  
Semipalmated Plover  
Killdeer  
Mountain Plover  
Black-necked Stilt  
American Avocet  
Northern Jacana  
Greater Yellowlegs  
Lesser Yellowlegs  
Willet  
Spotted Sandpiper  
Long-billed Curlew  
Sanderling  
Semipalmated Sandpiper  
Western Sandpiper  
Least Sandpiper  
Long-billed Dowitcher  
Wilson's Snipe  
Red-necked Phalarope  
Pomarine Jaeger  
Heermann's Gull  
Ring-billed Gull  
Caspian Tern  
Royal Tern  
Common Tern  
Forster's Tern  
Black Tern  
Rock Pigeon  
Band-tailed Pigeon  
White-winged Dove  
Mourning Dove  
Inca Dove  
Common Ground-Dove  
Ruddy Ground-Dove  
White-tipped Dove  
Orange-fronted Parakeet  
Mexican Parrotlet  
Squirrel Cuckoo  
Greater Roadrunner  
Groove-billed Ani  
Northern Pygmy-Owl  
Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl  
Burrowing Owl  
Spotted Owl  
Lesser Nighthawk  
Broad-billed Hummingbird  
White-eared Hummingbird  
Cinnamon Hummingbird  
Violet-crowned Hummingbird  
Magnificent Hummingbird  
Lucifer Hummingbird  
Rufous Hummingbird  
Russet-crowned Motmot

Ringed Kingfisher  
Belted Kingfisher  
Green Kingfisher  
Acorn Woodpecker  
Golden-cheeked Woodpecker  
Golden-fronted Woodpecker  
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker  
Ladder-backed Woodpecker  
Hairy Woodpecker  
Gray-crowned Woodpecker  
Northern Flicker  
Lineated Woodpecker  
Ivory-billed Woodcreeper  
White-striped Woodcreeper  
Tufted Flycatcher  
Greater Pewee  
Least Flycatcher  
Gray Flycatcher  
Cordilleran Flycatcher  
Black Phoebe  
Say's Phoebe  
Vermilion Flycatcher  
Dusky-capped Flycatcher  
Nutting's Flycatcher  
Great Kiskadee  
Social Flycatcher  
Tropical Kingbird  
Cassin's Kingbird  
Thick-billed Kingbird  
Rose-throated Becard  
Loggerhead Shrike  
Bell's Vireo  
Cassin's Vireo  
Golden Vireo  
Warbling Vireo  
Steller's Jay  
White-throated Magpie-Jay  
Green Jay  
San Blas Jay  
Mexican Jay  
American Crow  
Chihuahuan Raven  
Common Raven  
Horned Lark  
Tree Swallow  
Violet-green Swallow  
Northern Rough-winged Swallow  
Barn Swallow  
Mexican Chickadee  
Bushtit  
White-breasted Nuthatch  
Pygmy Nuthatch  
Gray-barred Wren  
Spotted Wren  
Cactus Wren  
Rock Wren  
Bewick's Wren  
House Wren  
Marsh Wren  
Golden-crowned Kinglet  
Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher  
Eastern Bluebird  
Brown-backed Solitaire  
Orange-billed Nightingale-  
Thrush  
White-throated Robin  
Rufous-backed Robin  
Northern Mockingbird  
Curve-billed Thrasher  
Blue Mockingbird  
American Pipit  
Gray Silky-flycatcher  
Phainopepla  
Olive Warbler  
Orange-crowned Warbler  
Nashville Warbler  
Lucy's Warbler  
Crescent-chested Warbler  
Tropical Parula  
Yellow Warbler  
Yellow-rumped Warbler  
Black-throated Gray Warbler  
Black-throated Green Warbler  
Townsend's Warbler  
Hermit Warbler  
Grace's Warbler  
Black-and-white Warbler  
Northern Waterthrush  
Louisiana Waterthrush  
MacGillivray's Warbler  
Common Yellowthroat  
Gray-crowned Yellowthroat  
Wilson's Warbler  
Red-faced Warbler  
Red Warbler  
Painted Redstart  
Slate-throated Redstart  
Rufous-capped Warbler  
Golden-browed Warbler  
Hepatic Tanager  
Summer Tanager  
Western Tanager  
Scrub Euphonia  
White-collared Seedeater  
Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer  
Rufous-capped Brush-Finch  
Green-striped Brush-Finch  
Green-tailed Towhee  
Collared Towhee  
Canyon Towhee  
Stripe-headed Sparrow  
Chipping Sparrow  
Clay-colored Sparrow  
Brewer's Sparrow  
Vesper Sparrow  
Black-throated Sparrow  
Savannah Sparrow  
Grasshopper Sparrow  
Lincoln's Sparrow  
Yellow-eyed Junco  
Northern Cardinal  
Pyrrhuloxia

Black-headed Grosbeak  
Blue Grosbeak  
Orange-breasted Bunting  
Red-winged Blackbird  
Eastern Meadowlark  
Yellow-headed Blackbird  
Brewer's Blackbird  
Great-tailed Grackle  
Bronzed Cowbird  
Brown-headed Cowbird  
Orchard Oriole  
Hooded Oriole  
Streak-backed Oriole  
Yellow-billed Caticque  
House Finch  
Red Crossbill  
Black-headed Siskin  
Lesser Goldfinch  
House Sparrow